

1. Introduction to Life Skills

Life Skills are defined as psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the challenges and demands of everyday life. They are loosely grouped into three broad categories of skills: cognitive skills for analyzing and using information, personal skills for developing personal agency and managing oneself, and interpersonal skills for communicating and interacting effectively with others

– UNICEF

1.1 Life Skills

By life skills, we mean those vital competencies that enable a person to sail smoothly through this journey of life with *savoir faire* at any stage to ensure full participation in everyday life.

A *skill* can be defined as an ability, most of the time acquired through deliberate practice, to carry out a certain activity smoothly and successfully. Everything from tying your shoelaces to running a country is a skill. Skills are usually related to things, ideas, and people.

The nature and amount of skill that one may need depends on the nature and complexity of the activity in question. The skills relevant to one person may not

be relevant to another. Depending on one's station in life, age, gender, culture, geographic location, profession, etc., different sets of skills assume varying degrees of relevance. For instance, a wheat farmer in Punjab, India, may need skills that are quite different from the skills demanded of an investment banker based in Wall Street, NY.

But there exists a gamut of skills that are of a more profound and fundamental disposition and are necessary and sufficient for all people in this planet to go about his or her life and make the most out of it.

The possession of these skills, which we will call *Life Skills* henceforth, right away guarantee the attitude and wherewithal to acquire any other skill or ability to deal with whatever challenge that comes one's way.

Put in simple terms, life skills are all about taking good care of yourself, interacting positively with others, and managing challenges that you come across.

Taking good care of oneself implies having a positive self image and self esteem or self confidence, being motivated, and being happy. This calls for self-awareness, the ability to deal with emotions, and the ability to cope with stress.

Interacting positively with others implies having healthy relationships, being assertive, being sociable, cooperative, compassionate, etc. This calls for empathy, effective communication, and interpersonal skills.

Managing challenges involves having the ability to figure out the right thing to do when faced with adversity and demonstrating leadership qualities. This demands problem-solving and decision-making skills which often calls for creative or out-of-the-box thinking and critical thinking.

- The lack of these skills can lead to inferiority complex, negative attitude, mental strain and in extreme cases, depression and self-harm tendencies.
- The lack of these skills are often the reason for constant conflicts; strained and abusive relationships; lack of trust, respect, sharing and caring; loneliness; cruelty; violence, etc.
- If these skills are absent, an individual will not have a clear value system or a pragmatic mind. He will not be able to take the right decision or plan ahead, causing a feeling of failure, worthlessness, and frustration.

A student or a person or a community not equipped with life skills cannot hope to tide over the adversities that inevitably arise as they go about the business of life. On one end of the scale, we may have dullness, lack of professional satisfaction, anxiety, frustration, and loneliness whereas on the other end, we may have depression, violence, substance abuse, and self-harm tendencies.

1.2 Life Skills as identified by WHO

The World Health Organization in 1999 identified the following core cross-cultural areas of life skills:

- decision-making and problem-solving;
- creative thinking and critical thinking;
- communication and interpersonal skills;
- self-awareness and empathy;
- assertiveness and equanimity; and
- resilience and coping with emotions and coping with stress.

Self-awareness

Self-awareness refers to a conscious and ongoing attention to oneself and one's inner states. Being aware of the self - what makes you unique as an individual as separate from others and the external world.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability and willingness to imagine oneself in another's place and see things through their perspective. It's about "putting oneself in the other person's shoes." A person who empathizes with others will feel, understand and accept their emotions, motives and concerns. Empathy is found to enhance prosocial(helping) and altruistic behavior

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is clear, rational and disciplined thinking where the thinker improves his thought processes by reflecting on them and recognizing the errors and biases that may be present. It is a means of improving one's own thinking. Critical thinkers use a group of interconnected skills to analyze, unify, and evaluate what is heard, seen, or read by them.

Creative Thinking

Creative thinking is a way of looking at problems or situations from a fresh perspective to conceive of something new or original

Decision Making

Decision-making is regarded as the cognitive process resulting in the selection of a belief or a course of action among several alternative possibilities. Decision-making is the process of identifying and choosing alternatives based on the values, preferences and beliefs of the decision-maker.

Effective Communication

Effective communication exceeds the mere exchange of information. It also involves understanding the emotion and intentions behind the information. As well as being able to convey a message clearly, you need to also listen in a way that gains the full meaning of what's being said and makes the other person feel heard and understood.

The Five C's of Effective Communications are clarity, consistency, creativity, content, and connections.

Values

A value is an enduring belief that influences our choices in life to promote well-being. Values are principles that reflect one's judgment of what is important in life. Ethical values are those that govern virtuous behaviour which in turn will promote well-being. These are more concerned with what is morally right. Evidently, not all values are ethical values. For example, values like efficiency, competence, self reliance, confidence, innovation etc. are not ethical in nature. Nevertheless, they promote well-being and therefore desirable.

Examples of ethical values are honesty, integrity, service, sharing, caring, empathy etc.

Since well-being is closely connected to the individual's needs, personal values differ in different individuals. Some values may assume priority over others depending upon the need levels of the same individual.

1.3 Attitude

Attitude is how we respond. It is relevant in today's world more than ever before and yet, is often misunderstood and misquoted. Attitude is nothing but a frame of mind. It can be defined as a predisposition to respond positively or negatively towards any stimuli - be it an action, a notion, a situation, a person, or an object. The cognitive component of attitude pertains to our conscious beliefs and ideas. The affective component of attitude consists of our feelings or emotions. The conative component of attitude is all about our actions and behavior. These components influence mutually and build upon one another to collectively form our attitude, which can be positive or negative depending on whether or not it promotes health, progress, and happiness to one and all.

Formation of attitude

Attitudes often arise without us being aware from the environment, experiences, and conscious learning. If we are not self aware and remain oblivious of the changes in

our inner world, seldom can we correct negative attitudes. But, being aware is only part of the solution. Our thinking must be positive. Easier said than done!! Since we have little direct control over our thoughts, a slightly oblique approach is called for. We should start by acting and talking positively. Positive words and positive deeds will create a positive air about us that will rub off on others also. Over time, positive thoughts will develop and strengthen, eventually crowding out the negative thoughts.

Manifestations of a positive attitude

1. Enthusiasm and zest for life
2. Thinking in terms of solutions rather than lamenting about problems
3. Finding humor even amidst difficult circumstances
4. Setting goals and setting out to achieve them
5. Creating and maintaining good friendships/relationships
6. Motivating and encouraging others
7. Being confident and believing in himself/herself
8. Showing courage, optimism, and resilience in the face of failure
9. Looking at the bright side of life

1.4 Attention to detail

A lot of people go through lives taking everything for granted without paying any close attention to the myriad details around them. If a job is to be done effectively, it is imperative to consider all the fine details, plan a strategy that leaves no stone unturned, and implement it fastidiously.

This involves

1. checking for accuracy of facts and figures
2. checking for completion of data and tasks
3. checking for consistency in the modus operandi, wherever required

Checkpoint 1.1 Imagine you are preparing a Powerpoint presentation. List out the various ways in which you pay attention to detail with reference to the above three steps.

Repeat the same exercise for the preparation of a project report. ■

Paying attention to detail makes one a competent professional in many respects, but that alone is not enough to become a great leader - for that one should be able to see the big picture.

1.5 Seeing the big picture

“A farmer had a beautiful horse. It ran away one fine morning. He was devastated and approached a Zen master for consolation. The master said, “You say this is bad luck. But who knows?” After a few days, the horse came back with another horse. Now the farmer had two horses. Everyone said, “You are so fortunate.” But the Zen master said, “You feel this is fortunate. But who knows?” A week later, the farmer’s son fell down from the horse’s back and broke his leg. The farmer again approached the master and said, “I have all the bad luck in the world.” The master replied, “You say it is a bad thing. But who knows?” A week later, a war broke out and the king’s officials came to the village for conscription. Every able-bodied male was enlisted. The farmer’s son was passed over because of the broken leg. The story goes on. The moral is that no one is in a position to say what will be good and what will be bad in the long run.

While it is important to pay attention to all the necessary details, it is equally important for a leader to keep in mind the bigger perspective, how things fit in the bigger scheme of things. This means not falling into the trap of “not seeing the forest for the trees”. If you are close to a problem with all the overwhelming details, it is good to step back a little, forget the details, and view the situation as a whole or to get the bigger picture. This is an essential leadership quality - knowing not only how and what to do, but knowing why. Peter Drucker, the management guru, used to illustrate this quality through the following story:

Three stonecutters were working in a quarry, cutting blocks of rock. A curious passerby asked the first one what he was doing. He replied, “Can’t you see? I am cutting rock.” Not satisfied, the passerby asked the second stone cutter. He replied, “I am cutting this rock to the specified dimensions so that it will fit in the right place in the wall.” When the third stone cutter was asked what he was doing, his reply was, “I am building a cathedral.”

Seeing the bigger picture will make you a philosopher or a visionary. But a pragmatic leadership demands both the qualities - seeing the bigger picture as well as paying attention to finer details.

1.6 Learning Skills

Learning skills refer to those skills that help one learn, understand, and retain things better. Good learning skills involve appreciating the need to learn and the ability to reflect upon your own performance. This means asking for feedback and accepting criticism from others. The best students are those who make use of feedback to improve the way in which they work in future. Skills and capabilities include: willingness to learn, prioritizing, information gathering, logical argument.

communications skills (written and verbal), project management, time management, decision making, analytical skills, critical thinking, attention to detail, ability to process large amounts of information, and problem solving.

1.7 Research Skills

Research refers to a systematic investigation for knowledge on a specific topic. Academic research activities around the world have catapulted human knowledge in an unprecedented manner. Clifford Woody describes research as “the process of defining and redefining problems; formulating hypothesis, collecting, organizing, and evaluating data; reaching conclusions; and at last, carefully testing the conclusions to determine whether they fit the hypothesis.”

A research student needs to have certain skills such as

1. A scientific temperament
2. An ability to evaluate objectively
3. Ability to prioritize based on relevance
4. Ability to systematically search for and organize data
5. A willingness to learn
6. Perseverance
7. Attention to detail
8. Time management skills
9. Ability to arrive at conclusions through logical reasoning
10. Good writing skills to pass on the results to others

1.8 Setting Goals and Reaching Them

A goal is the intended outcome of a task. It is a well-known fact that people who set goals and set out to achieve them are generally more productive and lead more satisfying lives. Before setting any goals, it is useful to get clarity with respect to two important points

1. *Why* is this goal important? This means getting the big picture
2. Is this goal about *proving* yourself or *improving* yourself?

S.M.A.R.T. Goals

Every goal must ideally be S.M.A.R.T.

- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Relevant
- Time-bound

Useful tips for pursuing goals

- Choose only a few goals at any time. We can handle only upto maybe five goals at any given time. So, we need to prioritize.
- Make sure that these goals pass the S.M.A.R.T. criteria.
- Anticipate setbacks and visualize the steps that help you overcome them.
- Set deadlines and review progress.
- Check for relevance periodically.
- While pursuing goals, instead of solely depending on willpower, anchor the goals to accountability.
- Adopt Kaizen. Take small steps *every day* towards your goal, for continuous improvement.

1.9 Intelligence Quotient (IQ)

Intelligence refers to the entire cognitive or intellectual abilities of a person to store and retrieve information; analyze and solve problems, and the capacity for logical reasoning. IQ is a measure of human intelligence found through specific tests. IQ had its heydays during the First World War when tens of thousands of Americans were recruited through pen and pencil IQ tests developed by a Stanford psychologist, Lewis Terman. People even used to think of IQ as a definitive indicator of success in life and career. Binet and Stern contributed much to this IQ way of thinking.

But now we know that having sheer intelligence does not necessarily imply a consummate personality. Other facets of intelligence came into prominence at a later stage.

1.10 Emotional Quotient (EQ)

Emotional Intelligence was popularized by Daniel Goleman in his famous book "Emotional Intelligence". As the name suggests, this refers to the ability of a person to manage his emotions. Self-awareness, self confidence, self motivation, self control, adaptability, commitment, optimism, and a host of other qualities come under EQ.

1.11 Social Intelligence (SQ)

Social Intelligence refers to the ability of a person to connect positively with others and get along well with them. It is about working together, cooperating, making and keeping good relationships.

Social Intelligence is a component of Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory. A brief description of Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory is given in Chapter 8.

A socially intelligent person will be

- able to understand behavioral cues in other people
- empathetic
- able to communicate well
- willing to listen
- service-oriented
- able to resolve conflicts
- able to motivate others
- able to choose the most effective response in a given situation

Evidently, social intelligence is an extension of emotional intelligence. This is because in every interpersonal interaction, there is bound to be an emotional subtext. As Aristotle said:

Anyone can become angry - that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way - this is not easy.

Activity 1.11.1 List out ten professions. Write down, in each case, all the situations that warrant IQ, all the situations that warrant EQ, and all the situations that warrant SQ

Activity 1.11.2 List out ten relationships. Write down, in each case, the relative degree to which each of the intelligences (IQ, EQ, and SQ) are required. Substantiate your answer.